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The use of linguistic principles in selecting reading materials is relatively recent. Several years ago at Wayne State University, over 200 principles were identified as possible criteria for the selection of materials. About 50 of these were linguistic principles, some of which conflicted with the others. Descriptive linguistics seems, at present, to bear the greatest relevancy to the teaching of reading, although this may change as transformational grammar develops. Five examples of descriptive linguistic criteria follow: (1) What provision is made for controlling grapheme-phoneme correspondence? (2) What focus is there in the materials on words per se? (3) Do the reading materials assume a single "correct" English? (4) Do the reading materials contain the common language structures of oral language? (5) Do the reading materials relate punctuation to intonation? For selectors to make wise choices, they must be aware not only of the whole range of principles, but also of the circumstances of given situations. (WL)

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LINGUISTIC PRINCIPLES

Session 20 C. Materials Selection and Evaluation

Linguistic Principles and the Selection of Materials

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Five years ago most teachers had not thought of linguistics in connection with reading and few recognized authorities had related linguistic knowledge to reading instruction. In the intervening years linguistics has become a popular word in reading circles. It appears with increasing frequency in the professional literature and is popular at professional meetings. It also occurs repeatedly in the advertising for reading materials and in the instructional guides that accompany many of these materials. In short, use of the term has spread like wildfire.

While linguistics was becoming a common word in the vocabulary of reading professionals linguistic knowledge began to be incorporated in reading materials. The amount, accuracy, consistency and type of linguistic knowledge used in these materials varied drastically. Some materials made

extensive use of linguistics; they were obviously different in content (and sometimes in format) from the usual reading materials. Other materials were advertized as integrating linguistic knowledge with more conventional content but often these materials appeared little different from established materials that remained unaffected by the advent of linguistics. Of course, many of the materials with some claim to linguistic involvement fit somewhere between these two extremes.

During this time "linguistic materials" became the hottest item on the market. The magic of this label insured interest, even excitement. For the first time new series were made available book by book as they came off the presses. The conventional procedure of holding all texts until the whole series was ready was junked. This meant that often the first book in the series had been on the market and revised at least once by the time the last ones were available. School systems sometimes committed themselves to materials without having the opportunity to study them. In such cases, it apparently was stylish to select materials that were supported by a claim to linguistic acceptability. An accompanying phenomenon was the rather dramatic increase of such reading materials on the market.

The Linguistic Method

The charisma of the term linguistics and the impact of the first linguistically based materials gave rise to three closely related misconceptions. All three are contained in the common expression "the linguistic method" which has been heard all too often in discussions of reading instruction. The first misconception is that there is only one approach to organizing linguistic content for teaching reading. A look at the various materials that include linguistic content shows the falsity of this belief.

The second misconception is closely related to the first. It is that there is general agreement as to the linguistic content to be included in materials for the reading program. Again a quick glance at the various available materials immediately makes clear how erroneous this is.

The third misconception is that there is one generally accepted linguistic method of teaching reading. Most authorities agree that so far no such method has been developed. What is often different is the content and its arrangement in the materials. But the approach to teaching this content has been, for the most part, rather conventional.

These three misconceptions brought to light in the expression "the linguistic method" have had unfortunate consequences. Many practitioners have uncritically accepted the first program that emphasized the word linguistic to come along. The approach used in that program or any very similar one has become the "method" in their eyes. Thus, they need not look further; they are among the vanguard. If the fashionable thing is to use a linguistics program then they are right in style. Frequently these people have been content that the linguistic knowledge presented in the materials is sufficient for full understanding of linguistics. A little further investigation makes clear that such a view is naive. The amount of linguistic knowledge now available simply precludes any such easy way of developing understanding.

Principles, Criteria, and Selecting Materials

The use of linguistic principles in selecting materials to teach reading dates back only a few years. Other principles receive more attention even now. In any case, when principles are identified for selecting materials

they assume the status of criteria. Everyone who selects materials applies one or more criteria as a standard against which to measure materials. This standard provides a framework for analyzing the materials. Viewing principles in this light clearly outlines the order and importance of the tasks of those responsible for selecting reading materials.

Selectors must first compile a set of criteria comprehensive enough to cover all areas they consider important. These criteria may embody psychological, sociocultural, literary and educational principles as well as linguistic principles. For example, certain principles relating to the durability, attractiveness and cost of the materials may be as basic to some selectors as any linguistic principle. In accepting these principles, no matter what their source, the selectors make them criteria for use in their analysis of available materials. The specific situation in which the materials will be used usually plays an important part in determining which principles to include.

After developing a comprehensive, consistent set of criteria the available materials must be analyzed to determine which of them most nearly meets the standard set by the criteria. The strengths and shortcomings of each of them must be determined. The one with the fewest weaknesses when measured against the standard provided by the criteria should be selected. Rarely will materials match the standard completely. The author probably used criteria that differed somewhat from those developed by any selector because only rarely are materials prepared for a specific local situation. The facts of economic life cause most publishers to strive for a larger market. Another element is that each situation differs from every other; each is unique. Variability of the children, the teachers and the reading programs are basic factors accounting for the uniqueness of each situation

in which reading materials are used.

The third task is the selection of the materials. It should be noted, however, that when the selectors follow the procedures outlined here the actual choice of materials rests upon the development of an articulated, comprehensive, consistent set of criteria and the analysis of available materials on the basis of these criteria. Selection itself comes naturally from the analysis of the materials according to the criteria established by the selector.

Representative Linguistic Principles

A couple of years ago four of us at Wayne State identified over 200 principles that selectors might use as critiera. [1] Of these, about fifty were linguistic principles. The remainder we classified as psychological, sociocultural, educational or literary principles. Since then additional principles in all categories have come to our attention. Among the more than 200 principles many are seldom used as criteria in analyzing and selecting materials. Others are contradictory; selectors court difficulty if they include some criteria that conflict with others they have accepted. Another thing is evident: 200 principles are far too many to handle in any useful set of criteria. Each of these things holds true for the linguistic principles, too. A great many of them are seldom used. Conflicting principles are included and fifty linguistic principles are more than most selectors would wish to accept as criteria in analyzing materials anyway.

Linguistic principles derive from the scientific study of language. Most linguists tend to reject the prescriptive approach of traditional grammarians. Descriptive linguistics seems at this point to have the greatest relevance to the teaching of reading. This could change as

transformational grammar becomes more widely understood and used in reading circles. However, in this paper I will confine my discussion to principles based on descriptive linguistics.

Representative examples of linguistic principles are embodied in the questions that follow. Each of these questions might be useful in establishing criteria for the analysis of reading materials for a given situation. Only those who must select the materials can make a judicious decision as to which, if any, of these will be appropriate. Better decisions can be made, however, if the whole range of possible linguistic principles is known to selectors. These examples, then, give an idea of the range of possibilities.

What provision is made for controlling grapheme-phoneme correspondence? The relationship between symbol and sound is rigorously controlled in some materials. Others ignore this principle. The Initial Teaching Alphabet is an attempt to provide a consistent and constant relationship between symbols and sounds. Each symbol represents only one sound in i.t.a. Other approaches using traditional orthography introduce children to reading in materials that are controlled to present only regular correspondence. Irregularities are withheld until later. From a linguistic view the task is to help the child understand the code: that letters represent sounds. This differs from the usual phonic approach which teaches children that letters have sounds, for example, by stressing the sound of "s". The Bloomfield-Barnhart materials, Let's Read, were among the first to stress a consistent grapheme-phoneme correspondence. Others have been made available since. The irregularies of American English spelling make it impossible to retain a consistent symbol-sound relationship for very long. Thus, this principle

probably has little utility as a criterion for analyzing materials other than those for beginning readers.

What focus is there in the materials on words as such? Many reading materials emphasize individual words in quite a number of ways. Children may be introduced to reading by learning a group of words by "sight". Often new words appear in teachers' materials as part of a list; instructions for presenting them to children accompany this list. Word charts and flashcards commonly are used. This emphasis on words seems so inescapable and correct that most adults do not question it. Yet linguists have found words as such difficult to deal with; the concept of a word is simply too fuzzy. They take spoken language as basic: printed materials contain speech written down. In written form words come through clearly because there are spaces between them. This is not always the case, however, in speech. The "gusinta" that many of us learned in division is a case in point. In written form there is no question as to the number of words, but in the normal flow of language the breaks between words are much less obvious. Is "gusinta" one word or two or three? Another illustration of confusion for children is that "have to" is two words but "into" is only one. The point is that words are not always as clear as educated adults often take for granted. Some selectors will choose the criterion that words should be emphasized in the reading materials because there is ample evidence that children learn to read using such an approach. Others will concede that children will probably learn to read if words as such are stressed, but accept an opposing criterion that the larger units of language such as sentences and strings of sentences should be emphasized because meaning is generated by the flow of language.

Do the reading materials assume a single "correct" English? Teachers have long been aware that dialect differences are widespread. Those who teach reading have struggled with the problems that result from these differences. Many have reached the point where they reverse the question in order to develop a suitable criterion: Do the materials provide for the predominant dialect in a given local setting? Linguists view all dialects as equally valid. This does not mean they are unaware that certain dialects are socially more acceptable than others, but that each dialect is systematic and is deeply internalized by the child by the time he starts any formal reading program. The problem is that many children are penalized when the reading materials assume a standard of "correct" dialect. Often those to whom standard English is unfamiliar must learn a new dialect and learn to read at the same time. In most cases present reading materials tend to give little attention to this problem of divergent dialects. They contain little to assist teachers in understanding that the language of children is a matter of dialect rather than immaturity. A growing number of materials, though still a minority, use the children's dialect as a basis for the vocabulary. Experience charts are probably the materials that provide the best approximation of the vocabulary and syntax of children's language. Few materials of any kind, however, deviate from conventional spelling.

Do the reading materials contain the common language structures of oral language? One frequent criticism of many contemporary reading materials is that "people don't talk that way" or "that sounds awkward". This is not just a matter of choice of vocabulary; it comes when uncommon language patterns are used. The less common language patterns simply do not sound "right". Often children try to "correct" the language of the materials to

make it fit their oral language. When a child encounters the sentence "The boys were running." and reads it "The boys was running." he is not displaying a lack of knowledge of language but rather he is making the printed matter fit the proper language pattern as he knows it.

A more basic difference between the common syntactical patterns in reading materials and those in children's oral language is illustrated when children flounder upon encountering "Jump," said Joe. Children in the lower grades very seldom use the object-verb-subject pattern in their speech. To those selectors who accept this principle it is important that children have materials that enable them to use the cue systems of their own language without encountering built-in obstacles.

Do the reading materials relate punctuation to intonation? All reading teachers have had experience with children who read aloud with little indication of any understanding of the relationship between punctuation and intonation. The fact that the punctuation within the reading passage must serve as cues for appropriate intonation seems to have escaped these children. Yet, all children, as pointed out earlier, know that the end of a statement can be signalled by a limited number of phrase terminal intonations. And they recognize each of these terminal intonations. Building on this knowledge carries greater possibility of success than does telling them that a sentence is a complete thought. After all, the latter stands as an abstraction that is often difficult to relate to language as even children know it.

The most common approach is for teachers to instruct children to "read with expression". Intonational cues provided by punctuation marks can be highlighted in reading materials so that children come to relate

punctuation marks with intonational signals that have long been a part of their language pattern. A closely related linguistic principle may be found in this question: Do the materials encourage children to supply the natural intonations in reading?

Conclusion

These few examples of linguistic principles that selectors of reading materials might include as criteria for analyzing materials illustrate phonemic, morphemic, dialect, syntactic, and intonation considerations. Other linguistic principles can be selected from each of these areas. In addition, principles concerned with the accuracy of language information as well as more general linguistic considerations might appeal to some selectors.

To make wise selections of linguistic principles selectors must have some knowledge of the variety of such principles from which they might choose. They also must know the specifics of the situation in which the materials will be used: the children, the teachers, and the reading program. They should recognize that psychological, sociocultural, educational and literary principles must be considered along with linguistic principles in order to develop a comprehensive, consistent set of criteria.

The wide range of reading materials now available makes a selector's task very difficult. The number of different basal series, supplementary readers, trade books, workbooks, review materials, tests, charts, cards, filmstrips, and teachers' guides increases almost daily. So many of these invoke the magic of the word linguistics that it behooves selectors of reading materials to know something of the linguistic principles they

might use as criteria for analyzing these materials. The selection of the most appropriate materials from among those available requires wisdom and knowledge in choosing the criteria that will guide the selector.

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[1]Goodman, Kenneth S.; Olsen, Hans C., Jr.; Colvin, Cynthia N.; and VanderLinde, Louis F., Choosing Materials to Teach Reading. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966.